

Alabama's First Interagency Wildland Fire Academy

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More than 140 wildland firefighters attended the first-ever Alabama Interagency Wildland Fire Academy May 11-20, 2001, to train in confronting wildland fires that threaten life and property. The academy was developed by the Jefferson-Shelby Wildland-Urban Interface Advisory Board as part of an educational strategy to train firefighters responsible for initial attack of fires occurring in the wildland-urban interface.

The term wildland/urban interface refers to geographical areas where urban structures – mainly residences – are built close to flammable fuels found naturally in wildland areas. The wildland/urban interface creates two major concerns: careless actions by homeowners increase the risk of wildfires and wildfires pose a greater threat to lives, homes and businesses.

Interagency Training Opportunity

House fires are traditionally controlled by structural firefighters using hoses from water mains and hydrants. Wildland firefighters, on the other hand, are usually charged with protection of homes, woodlands and their natural resources. Now that Alabama's larger cities are expanding into forests, valleys and hill-sides, structural and wildland firefighters often respond cooperatively to house



State Forester Timothy C. Boyce views the cache of tools and clothing in the supply tent.

fires that threaten forested areas and wildland fires that threaten residential areas.

The Academy was the first of its type in Alabama designed for interagency training and cross training. It was especially effective as a networking and team-building tool.

Wildland Firefighting Courses

Firefighters from forest industry, paid and volunteer fire departments, Oak

Mountain State Park, the Alabama Forestry Commission, the U.S. Forest Service and several private individuals trained in basic and advanced wildland firefighting, prescribed burning, medical support for fire crews, and equipment operation in the wildland fire environment. The National Wildfire Coordinating Group certified classes and training standards for S-130 Basic Wildland Firefighting, S-131 Advanced Firefighter Training, S-190 Wildland Fire Behavior, S-205 Wildland-Urban Interface, S-212 Wildland Powersaws



Preparing for a field exercise.

and S-359 Medical Unit Leader. Completion of required certified classes and a physical endurance test qualified individuals to obtain the Red Card Certification required to fight wildfires for the U.S. Forest Service. Coursework for State Prescribed Burn Manager and Dozer/Tractor Operator were also offered.

Incident Command System – The Academy was conducted using the Incident Command System (ICS) with Pelham Fire Chief Gary Waters as Incident Commander. ICS is a highly structured method of rapidly organizing personnel and resources for a specific purpose, typically to coordinate efforts of multiple agencies during an emergency, such as a large wildfire or a tornado. By conducting the event with ICS, participants got practical experience they will use in their careers.

Funding – The academy was funded by a grant from the Alabama Forestry Commission. The Forest Service provided 80 sets of tools and clothing for the trainees and later donated them for use in future academies. Retired federal judge Melford Cleveland generously offered the use of his Shelby County TREASURE Forest, Head-Cleveland Farms, as the site for the school. Gulf States Paper Corporation and John Deere Tractor Company donated funds for barbecue dinners and crawler-tractors for field exercises, and several electricians donated

their labor to bring in electricity for lights and audio-visual equipment.

When in the planning stages, the board estimated a class of 60-65 people. However, when brochures were mailed to volunteer fire departments, municipal fire departments, forest industry, state parks and the Alabama Forestry Commission, the response quickly exceeded the 150 mark. At the conclusion of the event, 145 students had trained in six different classes and 20 received Red Card Certification.

The 2002 academy will be advertised nationwide. For more information on the Alabama Interagency Wildland Fire Academy, contact Harry Kepler, Alabama Forestry Commission, 205-339-0929. 🏠



On the job training.



Hot meals were provided each day.